



Department of Health & Social Services
Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District

JOINT NEWS RELEASE

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Percentage of overweight, obese students appears to be decreasing in Mat-Su Borough

State health department shared new data at Mat-Su School Board Wednesday

ANCHORAGE, ALASKA — The percentage of overweight and obese students in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District appears to have decreased between 2003 and 2010 following the implementation of a number of physical activity and nutrition policies, according to a joint study by the district and the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services.

Between 2003 and 2010, Mat-Su Borough school nurses collected 19,357 individual reports of heights and weights from students in kindergarten, first, third, fifth and seventh grades. DHSS data analysts used these measurements to calculate body mass index (also called BMI), which is an indicator of body fat and risk of obesity-related health problems.

The study population represented almost 50 percent of all students enrolled in the selected grades in the district during that time, said Dr. Andrea Fenaughty, the epidemiologist with the state department's Division of Public Health who analyzed the data. Fenaughty presented the findings at the Mat-Su Borough School District's school board meeting Wednesday night in Palmer:

- 32 percent of Mat-Su students were overweight or obese during the 2003–2004 school year; by the 2009–2010 school year, that percentage had dropped to 26 percent.
- The problem of excessive weight began before school started; about 22 percent of children were above a healthy weight in kindergarten and first grade.
- Boys were more likely to be overweight or obese than girls; in the 2009–2010 school year, 28 percent of boys were overweight or obese, while 24 percent of girls weighed too much.

“Early indications show we are likely seeing a decline in obesity rates among students in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District — a district that has been on the forefront of putting in place the kinds of policies that get kids eating better and moving more,” Fenaughty said. “For example, the district has changed vending machine contents and provided lots of opportunities for physical activity during and after the school day.”

Obese kids are more likely than children of healthy weight to experience health problems, such as diabetes and asthma, and suffer academically, Fenaughty said. They also are more likely to become obese adults. Over time, excessive weight poses increased risks of arthritis and back problems, heart disease, several types of cancers, and ultimately premature death, she said.

During the years of the study, the Mat-Su district removed junk food and soda from school vending machines, adopted a wellness policy, and started a universal school breakfast program that provides nutritious breakfast options for all students.

“The Mat-Su Borough School District has championed wellness through our School Board policy, nutrition service offerings and physical education and health education curricula,” Superintendent Dr. Kenneth Burnley said. “We provide a healthy environment where students have nutritious meal choices, snacks and beverages; get regular physical activity; and learn about the importance of lifelong healthy behaviors.”

This weight study of Mat-Su students is the second time DHSS has partnered with a school district in the state to examine childhood obesity. DHSS has been working with the Anchorage School District to study height and weight measurements collected from students. In 2009, DHSS reported that the percentage of obese and overweight youth attending Anchorage schools had leveled off since 2003.

“We will be watching these rates very closely over the coming years,” Fenaughty said. “If this downward trend in obesity continues — and we hope it does — we will pinpoint what is working in Mat-Su and see if it can lead to similar successes in communities throughout Alaska.”

More information:

- DHSS report about percentage of overweight/obese Mat-Su students
<http://www.hss.state.ak.us/dph/chronic/pubs/assets/ChroniclesV3-1.pdf>
- Related DHSS press release about Anchorage School District:
<http://www.hss.state.ak.us/press/2009/drjaymedia.pdf>
- Radio actualities and video segments from Dr. Andrea Fenaughty, DHSS epidemiologist:
http://www.hss.state.ak.us/press/media/obesity_3-2-11.mp3
<http://vimeo.com/20538919>

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